

The language of complex texts:

"Feline Tracks"

Of all the larger predators, wildcats are the most likely to use the same trails again and again. In deep snow, their habitual routes become gully trails in which the feline tracks going to and coming from their hunting grounds are preserved, down out of the wind, away from blowing snow.

- We see in this text a key characteristic of such language: informational density-a lot of information packed into phrases, clauses, sentences
- Why so much stuff in each?
- Texts that are meant to inform or explain phenomena must include enough details to allow readers to comprehend and to interpret the writer's message.

What do ELs get? Greatly simplified texts:

An animal made these tracks. What animal made them? Did you guess a wildcat? The wildcat is a big cat. It hunts small animals. Which way was it going? Was it today or a week ago? We can't tell. Wildcats use the same path again and again. The paths are worn down.

- Simplified texts are supposed to be easier for English learners and language minority students to read and understand-but in fact they make literacy less attainable!
- To begin, they provide no clue as to how language really works in the kinds of texts they should be reading.
- The reduced content in such texts hardly inspire students to read more, or on their own.

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What instructional support is needed?

- The way to restart stalled language learning in ELs and to move them into overdrive in learning the language they need for advanced literacy is by helping them discover how language works in complex texts!
- This is done by getting students to notice how meaning relates to various forms and structures in the texts the students are working on, and getting them to talk about their observations.
- It requires students noticing, talking about, and using what they learn in writing and in speech.

How can teachers give access to meaning?

- Teachers help students discover how meaning is encoded in texts by engaging them in a process of deconstruction-calling their attention to phrases and clauses in sentences, asking them to consider how each part contributes to the meaning and shape of the whole. It is equally important for students to be able to see how to put everything back together again-to reconstruct what they have deconstructed.
- The forms and structures that figure in academic writing are learned most efficiently this way.

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